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Navy Checks Its Security Apparatus

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WASHINGTON, June 10 — The Office of Naval Intelligence has assigned a team of 35 people to search, here and at every ship and duty station where John A. Walker Jr. served, for the answers to two critical questions, according to Navy officers.

Mr. Walker, two of his relatives and one of his associates have been accused of spying for the Soviet Union for as long as 18 years. The Navy investigators, the officers said, are asking how they might have evaded detection by the Navy's security apparatus, and what damage may have been caused.

If the Walker group was in fact engaged in espionage, the officers said, it did so undetected despite showing many marks of an amateurish operation. The larger question, the officers suggested, was this: How many spy rings might even now be operating in a more clandestine fashion?

The officers said that as many people who served with Mr. Walker as possible were being interviewed to try to determine why he did not arouse suspicion. While they declined to discuss details, they cited the absence of "aberrant" behavior by Mr. Walker, a retired warrant officer.

Signs to Look For

They said the Navy looks for signs that an officer or sailor with a security clearance is having problems before he or she is put under surveillance. Excessive drinking, use of drugs, free spending or deep financial problems, and sexual promiscuity are among the danger signs.

Those responsible for detecting any spy ring involving Mr. Walker ring would be the Office of Naval Intelligence, the Naval Investigative Service, Mr. Walker's ship captains and base commanding officers, and the Defense Investigative Service.

Under Navy regulations, however, the officers most responsible for any breaches in security were the captains of the ships on which Mr. Walker served and the commanding officers of the naval stations to which he was assigned. The Defense Investigative Service or other agencies are responsible for the investigations of applicants for clearances that give them access to classified information. But commanding officers decide when to award or to rescind those clearances.

The Director of Naval Intelligence, Rear Adm. John L. Butts, said, "Our regulations require that each commanding officer maintain a program for continuous evaluation of the propriety of an individual's clearance and access to classified information."

2 Separate Inquiries

In statement to Congress before the arrests, he asserted that "our continuous assessment and review programs appear to be practiced and effective."

The Navy's investigation is separate from that of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which is seeking evidence in an effort to prove a criminal espionage case against him and the others.

The extent to which the two investigating teams were cooperating was not clear.

On the security issue, Navy records show that naval intelligence ran a background investigation on Mr. Walker in 1964 and gave him a "top secret" clearance on Aug. 9, 1965. But he was never checked again, despite Navy regulations that require such checks every five years.

Thomas J. O'Brien, director of the Defense Investigative Service, told Congress in April that his agency was far behind in making such checks because it lacked money and people. "The problem is basically economic," Mr. O'Brien said. "We just don't have the resources."

Checking on Suspects

Mr. Walker's brother, Arthur, a retired lieutenant commander, was investigated by naval intelligence in 1964 and given a "top secret" clearance in 1967. He was not investigated again until he was given a cursory check in 1980 and cleared for access to "secret" information to work for the VSE Corporation, a military contractor in Norfolk, Va.

Jerry A. Whitworth, John Walker's close friend, was investigated in 1969 by the Naval Investigative Service, an arm of naval intelligence responsible for counterintelligence and criminal investigations, and given a "top secret" clearance. Mr. Whitworth was checked

again in March 1978, by the Defense Investigative Service and had his "top secret" clearance renewed by the Navy that same month.

Michael Walker, John Walker's son and a yeoman aboard the aircraft carrier Nimitz in the Mediterranean, had an "interim secret" clearance that was given him when he completed basic training in 1983. Navy officers said that meant his Navy records were scrutinized but that a routine check of police and other records was not made.

All three Walkers and Mr. Whitworth were subsequently arrested and charged in connection with the alleged sale of information to the Soviet Union.

In 1972, the military services relinquished responsibility for background investigations and other security checks to the Defense Investigative Service. But each military service, upon receiving a report from that agency, issued the clearance.

Mr. Walker's lack of cooperation has forced the 35-member naval intelligence team to scour thousands of documents to see what might have come under Mr. Walker's purview, Navy officers said. An officer said the intelligence team was assuming "the worst case, but within reason."

The officers said investigators believed the main area compromised was naval communications. Beyond that, they said, was what one officer called "peripheral" damage to antisubmarine operations.